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Chinese Poetry and Zen

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WHAT is that impression poetry conveys to us? One might answer that it is an emotion the intuition of the poet arouses in us through the medium of a rhythm transmitted in certain arrangements of words. Each of these words, incapable in themselves of adequate expression, are chosen by the poet and fixed into an unalterable form. As the modern Japanese poet Hagiwara Sakutarō (1886–1942)[1] has remarked, in the poet expression is itself intuition.

> The mountain air is lovely in the setting sun,
> With flocks of birds returning together.
> Though here there is a fundamental truth,
> When I try to explain it the words disappear.

These lines by Tao Yüan-ming (365–427) are a particularly celebrated example of that poet's work. The mountain crests being overtaken by dusk in the afterglow of the setting sun, the flocks of birds hurrying in the glowing sunset homeward to their mountain nests—the poet perceives in this a "fundamental truth." The mountains, setting sun, birds, and the poet himself, each is in its own place, and at the same time takes part together with every other thing in producing the steady rhythm of nature. Perhaps it was this vast, limitless voice the poet was listening to when he realized: This is it. But when just as suddenly

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* The Japanese original of this essay, *Chūgoku no zen to shi*, appeared in the collection *Zen to bunka* (Zen and Culture), Vol. 5 of the *Kōza zen* series, Tokyo, 1968. Translator's footnotes are so indicated.—Trans.

1 萩原朔太郎

he came to himself and tried to recall what it was he had perceived, the words to express it had already vanished. This is perhaps the gist of these four lines. (The last two lines might also be explained in this fashion: when the poet experienced his realization of truth, the precise words with which to express it passed in a flash through his mind, yet vanished instantly, taking with them any clue toward its expression.) But either way, the moment a person starts mouthing vacuous words such as the "harmony of the universe" or the "dispensation of nature" he renders himself remote from his experience, and "it" spins off to a realm beyond verbal expression.

In his work *Po-ch'uang chih-kuo lu*, the Sung writer Shih Tê-ts'ao,[2] speaking of this same poem, says,

> Bodhidharma had at this time not yet come to China, yet Yüan-ming nevertheless understood Zen.

But this conclusion is arrived at much too hastily. Let us return and read over the poem once again.

Yüan-ming awakened to the existence of a "fundamental truth." And he could not refrain from explaining it either, for the question he had been constantly posing to himself throughout his life was one that sought the genuine mode of his own existence. Its answer was his resolute quest, and he could not rest content with a solution that could not be given in explicit words. Now—and this is clear despite the lofty symbolism of the first two lines—he has definitely experienced a revelation from Nature. Still, he cannot be satisfied merely with poetic symbolism. To seize what he has realized at this moment and make it an integral part of himself, is something he could only achieve by transmuting it into words of his own making. Trying to break himself free of the world of symbolism, he at once begins to grope for more immediate utterance. By the time he does this, however, the words have already disappeared, from "it" and from himself as well, without leaving so much as a trace behind.

He does not say he has awakened to ultimate reality. Nor does the poem suggest he has even realized that ultimate reality exists at a place beyond verbal

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2 北窗炙輠錄, 施德操

expression. If that were the case, the latter two lines would be dressed in poetic symbolism commensurate with the first two. But they are not symbolic. At least this is not a poem in which the poet, trying to suggest he has attained some manner of "enlightenment," uses symbolic language as a cloak in which to conceal himself. The poet's realization of truth does not properly belong to logic. Logic calls for analysis, which is possible of course only through the medium of words. When the words fade away, as here, or when they fail, the poet often resorts to metaphorical modes of symbolic expression. The practice is fairly universal. It may be seen in the Bible, where we read such passages as "the stars in Heaven, the lilies on earth"; in the words of the Chinese Zen monk T'ou-tzu (1031–1083), "the stars in Heaven, the water on earth"; in the poetry of the English poets Burns, Wordsworth, and Keats, which is a variety of religious confessional; and may be seen as well in the poetry favored by followers of the Chinese and Japanese Zen schools.

Generally speaking, figurative description including both metaphor and simile is indeed an indirect means of verbal expression in that it does not communicate things directly and immediately as they are in themselves. In a fully crystallized poem, however, it hardly bears saying that such analogical presentation can provide description that is at once much more direct and much truer and more exact than logically precise description. It is a privilege peculiar to poetry. For example, although I have been told that in English prose the phrases "it is like" and "it looks as if" sometimes carry a nuance of "it only appears so at first, and in fact is not so," the corresponding Chinese expressions, *ju* (如) and *ch'ia ssu* (恰似), allow metaphorical description that not only exhibits the essence and characteristics of the subject even more distinctly, but also possesses a suggestiveness that is able to "discover" or uncover new truth in the subject's inner aspect. And this is something that holds true even in Chinese prose. The notion of metaphor and allegory (*pi hsing* 比興) first advanced by Han dynasty scholars with regard to the allusive criticism in the poetry in the Book of Songs, is in effect a discussion based on this same character of analogical expression which is a distinguishing feature of the Chinese language.

The T'ang dynasty recluse-poet Han-shan (Jap. Kanzan) has the following verse:

My mind is like an autumn moon,
An emerald pool, clear and pure.
Nothing will afford comparison...
Tell me, how should I explain?

The verse centers on the manner of the relation and the contrast between the pool's azure crystallinity and the moon journeying coldly in the sky. It should be noted too that "clear and pure" refers subtly to both autumn moon and emerald pool. We thus should avoid the stock response of reading these first lines as some mental landscape built around the image of the moon mirrored on the pool.

Lines three and four declare the mind's absoluteness; since there is nothing comparable to it and nothing to which it may be contrasted, there is no way at all to describe it. And yet the first two lines have already likened it to an autumn moon and emerald pool, and, in the words "clear and pure," provided even further description. This is an obvious contradiction. In a work entitled *Jung-chai sui-pi*, the author Hung Mai (1123–1202)[3] tells how someone pointed out this inconsistency by asking: "Why, while saying that it resembles an autumn moon and emerald pool, does he declare there is nothing that will bear comparison with it?" Hung Mai himself then replies that the lines should be read: "Had I not had these two things to compare it to, How should I have described it?" But this is just quibbling. Not only is it unjustified to read the third line as a conditional clause, it is also impossible to interpret the word *wu* 物 (thing) in the same line as referring to either the moon or the pool of the previous lines.

Though one can hardly endorse an exposition that would twist poetry out of straight logical reasoning, there is at the same time no way to justify the clear inconsistency in the poem's thematic development. In effect, the poem is awkward, and artless to a fault. Much of Han-shan's verse is composed in an untrammelled manner, utterly unhindered by the fixed rhetorical construction known in Chinese as *ch'i-ch'êng-chuan-chieh*[4] (i.e., "development" of theme in successive four line groups: introduction, elucidation of theme, shift of viewpoint, summing up). In the first place, the laws for this verse form did not even

3 容齋四筆, 洪邁　　4 起承轉結

exist yet in T'ang times. They were not fixed until the Yüan dynasty. Still, were we to apply its criteria to the present poem, then we might say that the third line does not succeed in providing proper transition from the second line; because of this the metaphors of the first two lines also lack stability, and end up as faltering, half-achieved poetic statement. It is not a successful poem. But besides failing as poetry, there is an accordingly ineffectual disclosure of the mental state of the poet, which ought also to have been revealed. The degree of the crystallization or the intensity in the poet of the "poetic spirit" is something that is ultimately confirmed and established on the strength of his poem. Once he attempts to use poetry to voice his own state of mind, the fact he is a seeker in the religious sense notwithstanding, the level of attainment of the "Way" of the poet himself will inevitably be judged by the degree of perfection revealed in his poems. On this point Han-shan's poetry shows a great deal of unevenness. At least it seems that way from the verses that have come down to us. One of the reasons his poems did not receive the attention of later Chinese poets lies here as well. It is a question that bears upon Han-shan himself rather than his work; since, however, I feel it deserves special consideration, I shall take it no further at this time.

But let us now say something in Han-shan's favor. Here, in a verse by his alter-ego Shih-tê (Jap. Jittoku),

> Though my poems are still poems,
> Some take them as *gatha*.
> Poems, *gatha*, it's all the same—
> Reading them demands care.

we find a clear admission that his poetry is somehow different from conventional poetry. And while he will tolerate the comment that his verse is the same as *gatha* (religious verse), he at once turns serious and declares that poetry and *gatha* are after all identical. As a matter of fact, his words reveal an amusing sensitivity to the criticism that his poetry does not measure up to "proper" poetry. I was perhaps overly severe in censuring the previous verse by Han-shan as being totally unaccomplished. And yet, from the start Han-shan himself never once appears to have been troubled over the unutterable, incomparable condition of the "suchness" of things, or over the difficulty of attempt-

ing to relate it in words. The arduous effort involved in the task of symbolizing by means of poetry was a matter virtually without relevance to him. His best work, those examples successful as genuine poetry, are not those which attempt religious statement, but those in which the poet disports himself in a free, effortless revelling in the Way—the joyful outpouring of a "sportive samadhi." These poems are of a remarkably higher level than others of the same type written by Zen monks of the T'ang and Five Dynasties periods. They thus occupy a unique place in the history of Chinese poetry, and that fact alone imbues them with sufficient value. I have no objection whatsoever to such an appraisal.

Still, one is well aware of the tribulations that other poets have undergone when they have attempted to sing of this selfsame Way. For some, the Way has been Truth. For others, it has been Beauty, Keats's "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," for example.

The poet is one sensitive to beauty. Whether or not he is able to preserve the beauty he has perceived exactly as it is in an authentic poetic utterance is for him a matter of life or death. Those who have acknowledged the desperate nature of the difficulties involved in this and who have finally been overcome by poetry, are not uncommon, either in the West or Japan. The T'ang Zen priest Ching-ch'ing was led to this declaration: "To cast aside one's body is comparatively easy; to speak of things exactly as they are is surely impossible." These words also appear in the 46th case of the *Pi-yen lu* (*Hekiganroku*). Nakamura Hajime has paraphrased them, "to attain the experience of body and mind dropping off is comparatively easy; to express this realm exactly as it is, is not."[5]

Within the old, ever-recurring theme of "experience and expression," "thought and language," lies couched an *a priori* problem common to both religious and literary experience. To quote again the Japanese poet Hagiwara Sakutarō: "Intuition and expression are synonymous."[6] Indeed, as a concept of the poetic creative act, one can understand this. But the greater the sincerity of the poet—and it was true of Sakutarō himself—the more he must shudder

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[5] Page 413 of the Japanese edition of *Tōyōjin no shi-i hōhō*, I, 東洋人の思惟方法 (Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples).

[6] *Shi no genri* 詩の原理, chapter 6.

at the shadow so difficult to bridge that lies between the expresser and what he expresses. A person who is intoxicated with beauty cannot speak genuinely of beauty. To do that the mind must be fully awakened. Lacking that, there is no way for what Goethe calls "affinity" (*Wahlverwandtschaft*) to come into play.

When Ching-ch'ing said that expressing the realm of enlightenment was more difficult than attaining it, he was not equivocating. A man who has really gained this realm *must* be able to express it in itself, and express it in words, not only with a staff or with a shout or gesture. Unless he is able to do this he cannot be said to have definitely affirmed his true self in enlightenment. The unmediated relating of the realm of enlightenment by means of words is the very act of the superior man. But Ching-ch'ing's words contain by implication censure of an easy, automatic leaning on the catch phrases, "transmission of mind by mind," and "special transmission outside the scriptures," that would dispense with the trials and tribulations encountered on the way to this unmediated expression.

It is true that coolness and warmth are known by self-experience, but knowledge of them does not rest there. First, it must be expressed in language, then it becomes objectified. In the transiting of this reflective process the manner of the relation between the self that knows a thing and the thing that is known is confirmed; that is to say, without passing through the ordeal of self-confirmation neither enlightenment nor beauty can become one's own enlightenment or beauty, and thus they are incapable of being revealed to others. To the poet, the writing of poetry is similar. Mere statements such as "I knew the truth," "I saw beauty," are not the words of an enlightened mind, nor are they poetry.

In my discussion above of Han-shan's poetry I cited a verse of his confrere Shih-tê, in which Shih-tê objected to his verse being viewed more as *gatha* than as poetry, saying, "Poems, *gatha*, it's all the same."

I can, for a start, think of two reasons for Han-shan's poetry being called *gatha*. First, many of them have a definite religious odour about them. Second, a large number of them do not conform to any of the usual standards of Chinese prosody. Here I shall take up only the second of these reasons.

The *gatha* that appear as verse sections in the Chinese translations of Buddhist literature do not observe the rules of regular Chinese prosody. One might mention in this regard, for example, the total absence of rhyme, the high percentage of five and seven syllable-line *gatha* without the characteristic

rhythm such lines have in Chinese poetry, and also, in some *gatha*, the occasional shift of thematic context on the odd instead of the even line.[7] When we come right down to it, there is plenty of room for doubt whether when they read and recited these *gatha*, the Chinese were even conscious of them as poetry. Chinese saw in the verse of the Han-shan collection something bearing a resemblance to the gatha's strangeness that set them apart from conventional Chinese poetry.

I would like to part for the moment from Han-shan with the rather commonplace observation that, in order for any poem—whether celebrating the pleasures of the Way or concerned with the attainment of enlightenment—to have made a deep and lasting impression on the Chinese people and been capable of opening their minds to truth, it would have to have been properly executed. So, while agreeing it was perhaps inevitable, one must still regret the fact that Han-shan's works were passed over by later Chinese poets and remained the esteemed possession of a limited circle of Zen priests alone.

It is a generally accepted opinion in the Chinese view of things that the level of perfection of a work of literature—and this applies to both poetry and prose—coincides very closely with the development of the writer as a human being. This view of literature can and has given rise to the abuse of rendering literary production and appreciation inflexible within some prevailing moral issue. (The liberal-minded adage "do not reject the words because of the man; do not reject the man because of the words" has little applicability in the world of Chinese literary criticism.) At the same time, such a way of thinking also has resulted in the promotion of a severe critical judgement of the literary work as a piece of literature. Poetry tending merely to exploit beauty, poetry simply intoxicated by the heady atmosphere of the Way, poetry displaying some nobility yet basically inane, "metaphysical" poetry studded with hackneyed Taoist and Zen expressions, works that were inherently vainglorious or pedantic, were quickly detected and rigorously rejected. But even poems which set forth the special features of the author's personal world or vision were not regarded as poetry if their diction was rough and unrefined. Take, for example,

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[7] See for example the lines in the *gatha* portion of the *Anrakugyō* 安樂行 chapter of the Lotus Sutra, beginning with 後末世時.

the case of Wang Fan-chih, another "eccentric" poet of the T'ang dynasty.[8]

> The time prior to my birth
> Was pristine dark, bereft of knowledge.
> But Lord of Heaven insisted on bearing me,
> Bearing me, now what does he do?
> Naked, he makes me cold;
> Foodless, he makes me hungry.
> Return me to you, Lord of Heaven,
> Return me back before my birth!

In his work *Shih-shih* the poet-priest Chiao-jan (730–799) of the middle T'ang[9] cites this as a poem that will "startle the vulgar": "Though on the surface Wang may appear to be 'startling the vulgar,' within he conceals the capacity of a master." But the fact remains, such stylistic crudity would keep even a poem that possessed some legitimate truth from ever gaining acceptance as a proper poem.

Now let us turn to the religious verse (Ch. *chieh-sung* 偈頌 Jap. *geju*) of the Zen school. Ching-ch'ing has already told us of the extreme difficulty of expressing the integral experience of reality in language. Because of this, poets often resort to poetic symbolism. The Chinese view of the matter is that in the best poems both the essential meaning of the poem and the words used to enunciate it come together in a perfectly harmonious unity. No, let me put it this way: a poem that discloses any separation whatsoever between the two is regarded as having thereby confirmed an inherent defect in the character of the writer himself. To appropriate again Hagiwara Sakutarō's language, this is the idea that the expression and the intuition must coincide exactly. We can see in this the uncompromising discernment of the Chinese mentality regarding human "expression."

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[8] Wang Fan-chih's 王梵志 dates and details of his life are uncertain. Although he was known and quoted by one or two Sung writers, he seems to have been largely unknown until this century when a considerable number of his poems were discovered among the Tun-huang manuscripts. In the introduction to his edition of Han-shan's poetry (*Kanzan*, Tokyo, 1958), Professor Iriya places his poems no earlier than the last half of the 8th century.—Trans.

[9] 詩式, 皎然

Here is another of Han-shan's poems:

> I climb high-towering mountain peaks
> And scan the four sides expanding without end.
> I sit alone, unknown to men,
> While a lone moon illumines the cold wellspring.
> What is in the spring is not the moon—
> The moon still hangs in the bluegreen sky.
> And though I hum this little song,
> What is in it is not Zen.

The first line comes from a reply the Zen master Yüeh-shan (745-828) gave to the layman Li Ao: "Standing atop high-towering mountain peaks, walking down in deep sea-depths." The fifth and sixth lines are likewise adapted from an answer Yüeh-shan gave Li Ao: "The clouds are in the heaven, the water is in the jar." The third and fourth lines are a variation on some found in a poem by Wang Wei (699–759) entitled *Chu-li kuan* (竹里館 "Bamboo Country Dwelling"): "The deep bamboo forest, unknown to men, Is all bathed in light when the bright moon appears." The handling of these adapted materials is rather ingenious; the poet brings together the moon and the cold waterspring, allowing the reader to imagine the image of the moon mirrored on the surface of the water; then, in the next line he undermines and completely cancels out this image. Notice also the use of the three negative expressions, "without end," "unknown to men," "not the moon." The final line too is an out and out evasion, in which the reader witnesses a curious blend of self-concealment and self-assertion. (It should be mentioned that the traditional Japanese reading of this line as, "Isn't there [i.e., There is] Zen in this poem?" is wrong.) That the first six lines were assembled from the words of others and given slightly different twists is perfectly clear to everyone, the poet himself seems to have been conscious of it. The evasiveness of the final, "What is in it is not Zen," shifts the attitude of the first seven lines to dismiss any implication that the poet was consciously writing a Zen poem. It may perhaps also be regarded as an evasion in the sense of anticipating the previously seen charge that the verse is a *gatha*. Han-shan is not attempting to say that the poem represents his own Zen. Neither is he declaring some manner of "poetry-

Zen samadhi" apart from Zen proper. There is nothing to suggest an attitude of self-complacency. What is present is a remarkable circumspection, which I for one find refreshing. Han-shan fully understood the uncompromising nature of poetry, and the formidable ground of poetic expression. As for his prudence and honesty, I regard it as a priceless jewel. It is a quality totally absent in the religious verse of the Zen priests of the Sung dynasty.

In his *Shih-lin shih-hua* the Sung writer Yeh Mêng-tê (1077–1148)[10] criticized the verse written by Zen priests:

> From the middle of the T'ang dynasty public estimation of a great many Zen poet-priests was high and extensive. None of their poems, however, have been handed down to us. A few bare lines, "The sutra arrived at White Horse Monastery, The monk came in the year of the Red Crow," have been simply recorded by literary men. Then, we come down to Kuan-hsiu (Kankyū) and Ch'i-chi (Seikī), whose verse, though it has been transmitted to us, is not worth mentioning. The best of them by far was Chiao-jan (Kōnen). Ten *chüan* of his poetry are thus the exception in having come down to the present day in an intact form. One nevertheless can discern nothing conspicuously outstanding about them.
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> In recent times many priests have taken up the study of poetry, yet all lack a spirit of detached understanding; they for the most part gather up the phrases other writers have discarded and model their own poems after them. Though they still manage a style of their own of sorts, their diction is notoriously vulgar. People say their verse "savors of sour bean-paste" [after the beanjam buns they eat].
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> In a poem to the priest Hui-t'ung, Su Tung-p'o wrote these lines [in praise of] the former's poems: "The words have a tinge of the 'rivers and mists' that has always been rare; their sense of vegetable roots and grasses was unknown before you."
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> Later, however, Tung-p'o said this to someone: "Do you understand what I meant when I spoke of that poem's 'roots and grasses, etc...'? I meant that it did not savor of sour bean-paste."

10 石林詩話, 葉夢得

In the poet-priests of the Sung dynasty we see neither Han-shan's modesty and reserve toward poetry, nor his artless simplicity of utterance. Their inclination was more to adulation of the secular writers, or, in another direction, a propensity to "stink" of Zen. And on the other side, among secular writers—the literatis—there was an attraction to the charm of Zen words and a fondness for interpersing them in their poetry that became fairly widespread. Su Tung-p'o has a poem bearing the inscription, "An Epilogue to a Roll of Poems by Li Tuan-shu," in which the following passage occurs:

> I'll borrow some fine poems to pass away the night—whenever I come to a place of beauty, I'll at once be absorbed in Zen.

"A place of beauty" is of course a beautiful line of poetry; the poet states that reading a verse of such excellence produces the same experience that is to be found in Zen. Su Tung-p'o seems to praise the way Tuan-shu has concentrated a perceptive insight and religious understanding into poetry of unusual loveliness. Yet Ko Li-fang (?–1164) in his *Yün-yü yang-ch'iu*[11] (*chüan* 1) cites these same two lines and makes this observation: "This is probably Tung-p'o's warning against an excessive attachment to the use of Zen terms that appears in Tuan-shu's writing style."

Once, when Po Chü-i (772–846) was approaching his later years, he found himself torn between the sway of two conflicting laws, devotion to Buddhism on the one hand, and an unconquerable attachment to poesy on the other, the latter involving nothing less than a violation of the Buddhist precept against "foolish words and flowery language." In his youth, this mental division had not yet appeared. In a poem entitled "Tasting the Way," he wrote,

> The seven-part *Chên-kao* (*True Nobility*) discusses the Taoist Immortals,
> The one-roll *T'an-ching* (*Platform Sutra*) expounds the Buddha Mind.
> This day I know the falsity of all that is before me,
> And that I have been beset for many lives previous by external dusts [the objects of the six senses].

11 嶺雲陽秋，葛立方

He had experienced in earnest the discipline of religious practice, and this without any dualistic opposition between his search for the Dharma and his literary pursuits. Their later bifurcation occurred with the approach of old age, an event that rekindled in him an intense desire to seek the Way. Now, there is a deep and sincere questioning about the meaning of existence itself, which must go before "intuition and expression," "experience and literature." But for the Sung scholars Zen was not a religious quest.

The Ch'ing dynasty poet Chi-yün (1724–1805)[12] writes:

> Poetry ought to blend the flavor of Zen; it should not use Zen words.
> (*Ying-k'ui lü-sui, chüan* 47)[13]

Another Ch'ing poet, Shên Tê-ch'ien (1673–1769),[14] has this to say:

> Poetry cannot be divorced from the ultimate principle (*li*). Yet prize its being tinged with the principle itself, prize not the presence of words about it. (*Kuo-ch'ao-shih pieh-ts'ai*,[15] introductory chapter)

Some idea of the validity of this can be gained from a perusal of the selections of poetical lines by Zen priests included in the *Zenrinkushū*,[16] a collection of words and phrases gleaned from prose and poetry of all types and periods. One will find virtually no examples that can be said to be "tinged with" what Shên Tê-ch'ien calls the "ultimate principle" that are not also the work of first-rate (or nearly first-rate) poet-priests.

The Zen priest Fo-kuo Yüan-wu (1063–1135) is said to have attained sudden enlightenment upon hearing his master Wu-tsu Fa-yen (1024?–1104) recite the following poem:

> A scene of beauty, defying attempts at depiction—
> A deep inner bedchamber, revealing the languor of a young girl's love.
> She calls and calls her Little Jade, yet wishes nothing of her;
> She only longs for her lover to hear her voice.

12 紀昀
13 瀛奎律髓
14 沈德潛
15 國朝詩別裁
16 禪林句集

The elegance of this dwelling has an indescribable air that is utterly impossible to depict. In the seclusion of the ladies' bedchamber is a pathetic, heartbroken figure. She keeps calling out the name of her handmaiden, "Little Jade." But her reason for calling is not because she wants something of her maid, but because she wishes her lover to hear her voice and come to her side.

Translated by N. A. Waddell